

Season 5 | Episode #4

Desperate for Hope: Questions We Ask God in Suffering

Vaneetha Risner

Crystal Keating:

This is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast and I'm your host, Crystal Keating. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship and practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. As you listen, visit joniandfriends.org/podcast to access the resources we mention or to send me a message with your thoughts.

Vaneetha Risner joins us on the podcast today to have an honest conversation about finding true hope in suffering. She recently released her newest Bible study, *Desperate for Hope: Questions We Ask God in Suffering, Loss, and Longing*- encouraging readers to turn to Christ in their pain. Vaneetha and her husband, Joel, live in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she blogs at vaneetha.com.

She is a regular contributor to *Desiring God* and has been featured on *FamilyLife Today* and *Christianity Today*. So Vaneetha, it's so wonderful to welcome you back to the podcast, and I'm so excited to speak with you again today. It's awesome.

Vaneetha Risner:

I am so excited to be here. I have always loved our conversation. So, I'm looking forward to this one.

Crystal Keating:

Me too. And I can't believe we're in season five and you joined us in our first season and our second season. I just encourage our listeners. You're gonna love this conversation, but you wanna do a deep dive on Vaneetha. Be sure to check out our previous episodes. Even though you've joined us on the podcast over the years, it's possible that maybe some of our listeners are newer to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast and they're not as familiar with your story.

And, you know, our conversations have been so uplifting and relatable. So, I'd love it if you could just share a little bit about your story, maybe a snapshot of who you are, where God has brought you, and Vaneetha what life looks like for you today.

Vaneetha Risner:

Yeah. Well, there's a lot in that question, so-

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. There's a mouthful.



Vaneetha Risner:

Yeah, exactly. So, right now I'm primarily a writer, but I didn't start off that way. I have a degree in business. So that was sort of my lens. And then, through a lot of suffering, God kind of brought me to the place of wanting to tell other people about how faithful he has been in the midst of pain.

And so, the pain actually for me started when I was a child. I got polio long after the vaccine was developed, but I hadn't gotten the vaccine yet. I was in India, and they don't give the vaccine until six months, and I was three months old. And so, the doctors had no idea what I had. They gave me the wrong medicine and I was a quadriplegic at three months old and the doctor said there was nothing they could do. But we ended up leaving India, moving all around the world. We were in England and then Canada and the US. Spent a lot of my childhood in the hospital. Had 21 operations though by the time I was 13 and learned to walk, which is kind of crazy thinking.

I started as a quadriplegic. But a lot of my muscles somehow regenerated and so I led a pretty normal life and really became a believer at 16. I'd heard a lot about God and the gospel cuz my parents are believers but accepted Christ at 16. And really thought my life was gonna be really easy after that.

I assumed that if you're a Christian, you, you know, have the abundant life. And the abundant life to me meant everything that I wanted. Yeah. And, and I got that for a long time. So, I really believed that's all that God had for me, which was wonderful. But it was more about things and success. And then all of those successes started unwinding.

I had four miscarriages. I had an infant son who died because of a doctor's mistake. He was born with a hypoplastic left heart, which means he has half a heart. And he had surgery at birth, was doing really well after the surgery. But a substitute doctor took him off all his medicine saying he didn't need it, which wasn't the case. And he died a few days later, which was really the start of my wrestling with God and thinking, how can this happen to somebody who loves Jesus? And it really deepened my faith. At the same time, I have to say I first walked away, or I turned away from God. I didn't wanna talk to God. I was angry. And yet God drew me back to him. And I recognized that my faith before was one about God's gifts and not about who God was.

And I didn't really understand what it meant to lament or rely on God. And, and so through that, my faith really became a lot more solid. And then I'm glad that happened because six years later I was diagnosed with post-polio syndrome, which basically means my arms and legs are getting weaker and I am going backwards based on how much energy I spend. And one day I will be a quadriplegic again.

So that's been a very sobering thing and I've learned a lot from Joni through that experience and diagnosis. And then six years after that diagnosis, my ex-husband came home and told me he was leaving for someone else. So, I raised two adolescent daughters as a single parent who were pretty angry at the time, and both walked away from God.



And you know, we prayed, and God brought them both back and taught me a lot about dependence. So learned a lot about suffering. Never thought I would write about it. And then somehow God called me to do that, and really, so that's what I write about. That's what I do. When you ask what my life looks like today, it's kind of boring.

I have to say. I sort of sit in my home office and I dictate on my voice recognition software. I have a lot of time though with the Lord, which is pretty amazing in this stage of life. I can get up and just spend a lot of time just reading the word and finding comfort in that. So that's a lot of what my days look like.

And my husband Joel, I, remarried after I was divorced, and my husband is incredible and an amazing gift from God. And I always tell people I love his name, which is Joel because Joel 2:25 says, I will restore the years the locust has eaten, and in Joel, God has restored so much.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. Well, Vaneetha, you are truly acquainted with grief. But you're also very acquainted with God's grace and care in your life and provision, and I just love your faith. I already feel the hope in my heart rising. And so maybe I don't even need to ask this, but I really want to know, what motivated you to write the Bible study, *Desperate for Hope: Questions We Ask God in Suffering, Loss, and Longing*.

Is this Bible study, particularly for women or all people? What lit your fire for this?

Vaneetha Risner:

Yes. Well, this Bible study is geared to women, but I think anybody would benefit from it. But we look at six women in the Bible and how God met them in their pain.

It's about suffering. But I think it's for people who are walking with friends who are suffering, people who are suffering right now, people who have suffered and maybe haven't processed all that's happened. And then for people who are going to suffer, because I think suffering comes to all of us at different times and in different ways.

I don't think suffering has to be, you know, you lose a child. There's a lot of hard things and a lot of losses and longings that people are dealing with that maybe they don't recognize, or they don't call it suffering because they feel like suffering has to be something huge when it really doesn't.

It's whatever's hard in your life can be suffering. But I wrote it Crystal because I had a lot of questions in suffering specifically after my son died, and I really felt guilty asking those. I pulled away from God because at first, I didn't wanna ask them because it seemed like I didn't have enough faith if I asked them.

And I heard that so much from people. Well, if you have enough faith, you don't ask God. And so, I was holding God at arm's length cuz I didn't dare ask him something. And when I finally did, questions sort of tumbled out and I realized God was longing to answer me. I feel like I grew



so much closer, daring to ask the things that were in my heart that I thought, oh good Christians don't ask that.

And so that's why I wrote the Bible study to say it's okay to ask God. It's good to ask God because God longs to be gracious to us, to answer us to be there. And if we don't ask, we're never gonna know. And so that's why I wrote it because I want people who feel like they're in the pit and feel desperate for hope, to recognize hope is in a person and that is Jesus. And that comes when we actually talk to Jesus about what we're struggling with.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. Well, and what you shared just makes me think of our propensity to become Christian shells, that we sort of have this external look of wanting to do what the Lord is asking us and yet, all the while having this sort of empty, hollow, tumultuous inside and not knowing how to connect the two.

So, the parts of your Bible study that I read impacted me deeply because even the way that you asked questions, and you ask the readers to pause and stop and write your true emotions and just the reality of having to come face to face with how we really feel and think there's something freeing about that.

And so, I can see how when we can be honest with ourselves, then we can really start experiencing God's nearness, you know, God drawing close. And so, I love that format. I think it's so great.

Vaneetha Risner:

Oh, thank you. Yeah, it's interesting cuz I taught women's Bible study for years, but I feel like I wasn't always honest with myself.

There was what I saw in the word, but I didn't always really relate it to the deepest parts of me. And I realized in suffering, a lot of those layers kind of peel back. And if we're willing to go there with God, God can touch a part of our soul that I think often we leave so covered up that we don't even connect with him.

Crystal Keating:

Right, right. And that's so well said. You know, that brings me to the next question. You wrote a post on Instagram that generated some of the most activity I've seen on your page, and it speaks to this idea of this veneer of Christian character when inside we're sort of dying on the vine.

And you wrote, denying our deepest longings under the guise of contentment may look more holy, but can lead to spiritual deadness. And you went on to share that many years ago you really had a desire to remarry after the heartbreaking divorce with your first husband, but you kept it a secret from others, even yourself. Lest it appear that you weren't fully trusting the Lord, and I think a lot of people can relate to that. So, can you talk about that season of your life? Why do you think this post resonated with so many of your followers?



Vaneetha Risner:

That's a great question, cause I think it resonated with people because we often do that. We're so afraid to really voice what we really want, because we wonder, one, if we don't get it, is God gonna look bad?

Are we gonna look pitiful? And I'm like, I wanted to be married my whole life and I never got married. And I think that shows that we don't really trust God because it's okay even if I never got married. I think it's okay to say, yeah, my desire is to be married and to keep giving that to God. And I find that when we are willing to say, hey, I want things to be different. Cuz that's basically what I was saying is I want things to be different. I think I let God into that space, and I let him comfort me and him be there for me.

Whereas if I pretend it doesn't matter to myself and even to God, then I can't experience God's comfort. And I start to put up walls and I find that people even that I'm not as honest with, there really is a wall there because I'm trying to look like I have it all together. Whereas with close friends, when you say, wow, I messed up, or, wow, I really want this, and I don't have it. And I think so many of us are thinking there's things that I want, you know, I want children who are saved.

They're godly things that we want. We want a husband who loves us. We want a healthy body. And when we don't have those things, we think, well, I shouldn't explain to people that I want it. And I've found that facing that disappointment and really trusting God in it and saying, even if you don't give this to me, I want you to know this is my heart's desire.

And I asked God to take it away if, if it wasn't gonna be fulfilled. And yet I wanted God to know and wanted to ask God to help me draw near to him in that. Because I think whenever there's a loss or a disappointment, that is an invitation to let God fill that place versus filling it over with a platitude which I think is often what we do cuz we don't wanna hurt.

Crystal Keating:

Very true. And I would say just in my own experience, we so value and are thankful for God's sovereignty in our lives. And yet I think that very thing at least in my own life, it is kind of like I've resigned myself to God's sovereignty.

Like, this is what's good for me and his best. And the longings are still there. And so, both can be true. And I've really wrestled with that. You know, if God is good, then why haven't these desires for X, Y, and Z? Or why haven't I been healed? Maybe somebody would ask that. If God is sovereign. And so, I don't know, have you ever wrestled with the sovereignty of God in your longings?

Vaneetha Risner:

I feel like I have wrestled often. Like if I really want this and this is a really good thing, and I know because God is sovereign, he can do this. Yes. And yet he doesn't.



There is this wrestling with like, why do I have this longing and why is God withholding this good thing for me? And there's things that everybody would say are good. It's not like, you know, a multimillion-dollar house. It's I want a healthy body so that I can even be awake in the morning so I can hear you and, and read the word and a husband who loves you. These are all things that people would say, yeah, that's a good and godly request. And I think those are the hardest ones because we think, well, of course, these are good things. And yet, God in his sovereignty and love has said no. And I think going to him and saying, wow, this feels hard, and this feels unfair, but just help me to rest in you in this.

And help me to find you in it. And I think that's the biggest thing that has been a comfort to me is even when I don't get what I want, I get God's presence in the midst of it, and I may never understand. I may never understand why God took my son, Paul, as I was begging God to let him live, and yet God gave me his presence and this promise.

I think that this was good, even though I can't see it and they never understand it. And I was just reading today in John 13 where he says to the disciples in a different context, but when he's washing their feet, he says, what I am doing now, you do not understand but afterwards you will.

And that I think, is so true of so many of the things in our lives that what God is doing now, we don't understand. But one day we will, and that's the hope that we have.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. That is the hope. Wow. I don't think I've ever paid attention to that small comment that Jesus made. but it is so very true and very comforting.

Wow. So Vaneetha, throughout the many challenging seasons you've encountered, what are the three anchors you've clung to that helped make sense of your suffering?

Vaneetha Risner:

Well, the first anchor that I think has taken me through so much of my suffering is God's presence. So, they're basically three P's that I cling to, and I came up with those really as I wrote the Bible study, as I prayed about what has God taught me and it's actually been so helpful as I look at my own suffering. I put it through this lens of the biggest thing God gives us is his presence. God is with us. We sense that he's there. And the second thing is that our suffering has purpose. It is not meaningless. And, and I learned that from Joni actually. I remember reading her book *When God Weeps*. And she really talks about God's purpose and suffering.

And just as I mentioned from John 13, there is a purpose, but we may not understand it, and being willing to let that go and say we may not know. And then the last is the promise of heaven because we will meet Jesus face-to-face, and our suffering will end. And just knowing that it is temporary in that sense, even if it looks like it's gonna last our lifetime, one day, everything will be made new.



And so, I think looking at our suffering through those three things, God's presence, God's purpose, and the promise of heaven makes it very different than if we didn't have those. So those are what I cling to.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. Well, in your study, you really speak to women in various stages of their life.

You kind of talked about this earlier in our conversation, even addressing those who are not currently in a season of suffering, which I really appreciate because, like you talked about, there's a promise to that in this life you will have trouble, which is not a promise I love. But it's, it's kind of like an expectation, like we will encounter challenges. But Jesus will be with us through that. So, one issue you address well is the idea of processing past losses through a biblical lens. We know that past losses if they are not truly processed and dealt with, they continue to pop up in the present. So, can you share how God's word can help us make sense of past trauma or living a life that simply is not at all what we expected or hoped for?

Vaneetha Risner:

Yes. Well, I think whenever we have losses or longings, any of those things, wounds come up in our own lives. Things that we don't think are fair, whether it's betrayal or hurt or infertility, things that we wanted that we don't have a lot of times bring wounds in our lives. And what we do, or what I do, and I think a lot of people do, is we tell ourselves lies about those wounds.

Like, I'm not enough. We think God doesn't care. We come up with these stories that we start telling ourselves about these past hurts. And I think scripture is the way that we can combat those lies. Like we are enough because God is enough, and we are in Christ. And so, scripture has helped me identify the wounds and the lies and replaces them with truth.

And so, when we go back and we see the promises of God when he says, that he loves us. You know, even in Jeremiah, I have loved you with an everlasting love and just the promises of Christ. And so, when we can identify from our losses what are the lies we've believed about ourselves and about God, then scripture can come back and really combat those and help us really see things in a different perspective. And so that has been one of the things that I've really appreciated as I've read scripture, is that it convicts us and it comforts us, and it shows us the truth of God. That when we go back and look at suffering, like when I go back and look at what I was telling myself when my son died, a lot of it was, God doesn't care, or this is my fault, should I have done something different? And just seeing the truths of God's sovereignty and in God's love and God's goodness really reframe how I look at that past suffering.

Crystal Keating:

And that's so important for us to be rooted in and anchored in also because we're ministering to others.

I think that's one of other reasons I really loved going through your study is because it better equipped me to talk to my friends who were in a season of suffering. Can you talk a little bit about that aspect of it?



Vaneetha Risner:

Yeah, that's one of the benefits or one of the things that I really hope people get from that is how can you talk to your friends?

Because a lot of times when you're suffering, it's hard to pick up the Bible. It's hard to do a Bible study. And so, I want people to see maybe words that they can use, ways they can show their friends like this is how you can draw near to God, or this is what lament is. And I even talk about corporate lament cuz I think that's a really important thing is lamenting with people and, and learning how to pray with them through lament.

And I talk about that actually on the videos is, when somebody's struggling sometimes we don't even know how to pray or what to say. Yeah. Cuz we wanna say, we wanna say one of two things. This is so awful. I can't believe it. This is so awful. Or we wanna say, well, trust God. It's gonna be fine.

And neither of those things leave people with hope. And yet, if we can lament the way Biblical lament looks like, which is acknowledging what's hard and trusting in God's goodness, at the same time, we can go in and pray. First, thank God this is so hard. We would be crushed under this if it wasn't for you.

And then reminding ourselves what we know to be true in the Lord. And so, I think this Bible study, I'm praying will give people tools when they are talking to their friends who are suffering to give them this framework of God's presence. God is with you and there is a purpose, even if you may not see it.

God is using this for your good and for his glory and that truth really changed my life when I thought my suffering isn't meaningless. There is gonna be something amazing that comes from this. I think that really changes how we view what we've been through. And so, I think that is a way that we can give people courage and hope as they go through their own pain.

Crystal Keating:

It truly does. And you, you mentioned another one of the ways that you really cling to God is by embracing his presence. I've experienced this and I know many people living with disabilities who struggle with isolation and a sense of separation from the Lord and Christians.

Really, I mean, when we're together, believers who have the Spirit, we sense God's presence in a greater measure, I believe. So, when we're alone, I think it's easy to ask the question, how can I know God's presence when he feels so distant? And so, I wanted to ask you, how has God met you in clear and unmistakable ways in your seasons of darkness, and Vaneetha, how would you answer this question for someone who's longing for the nearness of God?

Vaneetha Risner:

Hmm. Well, I have found God's presence most strongly through scripture. But I don't say that to just say, okay, well if you open the Bible, God is just gonna jump off the pages because there are times when reading the Bible feels like eating cardboard. It just feels really...



Crystal Keating:
That's real. Yeah.

Vaneetha Risner:
Mm. And you just think, okay, why I'm not getting anything out of that?

And one of the things, this sounds so simple, but when I call out to God in the midst of that and say, I'm not getting anything out of this. Show me yourself. I find that God does, and it's a simple prayer. You know, Psalm 119:18 says, open my eyes that I would see wonderful things in your law.

And I think when we ask God and just go to him as we're opening the Bible, like, show me something. Show me yourself. And Psalm 119:25 is one of my favorite verses where the Psalmist says, my soul clings to the dust, revive me according to your word. And so, God calls us to just call him and say, revive me according to this word, this word that maybe feels like cardboard right now, but I know you can breathe life into it.

And often my eyes just settle on something else. And I sense God's presence. And I think a lot of it comes down to expectation. Do I expect that God is gonna show up for me? And if I feel like I'm reading the Bible just because I have to, then sometimes I leave very dry. And it's not like every time I read the Bible, I just feel overwhelmed.

But I do a lot more when I'm willing to sit with God and acknowledge that I'm not feeling his presence, and everything seems dry, and God can breathe life into that. And that's what I feel the most near is when I just repeat the words of scripture back to God. And I'm willing to lament and willing to find places in the Bible where people are saying the words that I feel. Because most of the emotions that we have, there's somebody in the Bible that has said something like what we feel or even stronger oftentimes.

Crystal Keating:
Right? Yes, very true. How long, oh, Lord, how about that?

Vaneetha Risner:
Yes.

Crystal Keating:
I mean, yeah, the Psalms are a great place to put words to our emotions. Like, have you forgotten me?

Yes. I'm kind of stating the things that are really hard. There's a lot of praise in there as well. Like, he rescues our life from the pit. You know, those things where we can say, yeah, you really have brought us up. I so appreciate your humility, even as you approach scripture to say, Lord, show me yourself.



Speak to me. Speak to my heart in these moments so that I can know you're with me. I love that. So, I wanna ask another question. I, I feel like there's two questions that feel too overwhelming to actually face. Like what if the worst happens? And what if it never gets better?

I know Joni has talked about this even in her pain. What if there's never a solution for it? And I think fear can easily grip our souls and keep us paralyzed rather than clinging to God in trust. I just feel like, Lord, you must meet us there or we're not gonna make it. And the reality is that many who live with chronic illness, ongoing pain, or a difficult diagnosis will not experience much improvement in this life.

So, Vaneetha in what ways can someone in this long-term trial find true hope and a sense of God's peace?

Vaneetha Risner:

That's a great question. I would say to the question of what if the worst happens, cuz I think that's what we all fear is the worst is gonna happen. And yeah, two things to that. Sometimes it doesn't happen, and a lot of our fears are unfounded.

I think we all kind of are, at least I do. I go to the nth degree. Like if my child is misbehaving, I'm sure they're gonna be in jail by the time they're 20, you know. And so, they think that we in the moment think, okay, this is really bad, and it actually doesn't happen. And I realize that sometimes we just don't trust God with the future.

We can trust God with today. But the future seems so vague that we can't trust God in the future. But realizing that God will give us the grace to deal with whatever comes when it comes. So, we can't imagine the grace that God is gonna deliver if the worst happens. And so, sort of seeing that I think has changed me realizing if the worst happens, God's gonna be there for me.

Like a lot of what I thought would be the worst that could happen, happened. And anticipating it, I would have no idea the grace that God would flood into my life as I did it. So that would be one thing I would say. And the other thing for both of those questions, what if the worst happens? And what if it never gets better, which actually are two of the questions that I ask in the Bible study? Those are two of the questions that we all ask. And the biggest answer is, God is with us. If the worst happens, God is with us. Even if the worst happens, God will never leave us. And I love like Psalm 23:4, though, I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me.

And understanding even if whatever we're going through is going to take our life, we will not have one moment without Jesus. Not one second. And that is such a comfort recognizing that God will never leave us. And a couple days ago I was just reading about Jesus saying as he walks into Jerusalem, that he longed to draw the Israelites.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, I would love to draw you under my arms, the way a mother hen does. And it made me think that really is the place of safety is that close to the mother hen's heart and



protected from the world because you're under her wings. And that is what I think when the worst happens.

Knowing God will always have us under his wings gives me this huge sense of comfort and knowing that even if it doesn't get better in this life, it is going to get better. This life is over in the blink of an eye and whatever we deal with joy or sorrow on this earth is the worst emotion we're gonna feel in terms of forever. Joy or sorrow is gonna pale in comparison to what we have in heaven.

And I think keeping that in mind is what Joni and people who live with constant pain that they know is probably not getting better in this life. Knowing, hang on, something so much better is coming.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. I love that. Well, you expressed that the deepest fellowship you've experienced is among other suffering believers. And you wrote that even though you often can't meet each other's physical needs, you all can pray, which I just love.

This you say is the most important work of all. It really is. So how has God ministered to you through other hurting Christians who have truly experienced the Lord's comfort and grace in the midst of their tremendous and ongoing hardships?

Vaneetha Risner:

I think it's amazing hearing from people whose lives have been battered by suffering but still trust God.

Their prayer life is incredible. Joni has introduced me to a friend of hers named Rika who lives in South Africa. She's incredible. I was just messaging her a couple of days ago and her life is so difficult. She lives with aging parents. She has just a few hours a day maybe where she can even read or do anything.

She stays a lot of times in a dark room. And yet her faith and the way she prays and cares for people blows me away. And I can't think of anybody who's more encouraging for me. And when Rika says, I'm praying for you, like, that feels like, you know, one of the angels. I mean, I can't even tell you. Thinking that Rika is praying for me is incredible.

I think for a lot of us, we think that when we're suffering, we can't really serve people. And that's been a hard thing for me in some ways. Like, I'm not bringing people's meals. I'm not doing those things, but I can pray. And when we think that our God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, our prayers are mobilizing angels to do God's bidding and, and for God to do miracles in our lives. So, praying really is a huge thing that we do. But often we say, well, I can't do that, but I can pray as if prayer isn't that big a deal. But when we think about it, prayer is a huge deal and that is something that everyone can do.

Crystal Keating:



So very true. Well, Vaneetha, I've just loved this conversation. And I know our listeners are probably wondering how they can order and participate with your Bible study, *Desperate for Hope: Questions We Ask God in Suffering, Loss, and Longing*. Where can they purchase this Bible study?

Vaneetha Risner:

Oh, well it is coming out with Lifeway, so you can purchase it, from Lifeway directly. You can also get it on Amazon or wherever you buy Christian books probably.

Crystal Keating:

Perfect, perfect. Vaneetha, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today. And may God continue to give you a voice to share real hope. God bless you. So great to have you.

Vaneetha Risner:

Oh, thank you. It was wonderful to be here, Crystal.

Crystal Keating:

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